

INNOVATOR OR IMITATOR: NAPOLEON'S OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS AND THE LEGACIES OF BOURCET AND GUIBERT

**A MONOGRAPH
BY**

**Lieutenant Colonel James N. Wasson
Air Defense Artillery**



**School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff
College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas**

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ABSTRACT

INNOVATOR OR IMITATOR: NAPOLEON'S OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS AND THE LEGACIES OF BOURCET AND GUIBERT

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In 1805, a new style of operational warfare burst upon the fields of Europe as Napoleon Bonaparte's Grand Army swept from the Rhine to the Danube surrounding the Austrian army at Ulm and initiating a revolution in military affairs (RMA) whose effects are still felt today. The question remains whether this new style of warfare was merely a natural outgrowth of the work of 18th century military thinkers, whose theories were imitated by a dynamic leader, or did Napoleon bring something new to warfare, a true innovation in the conduct of operational warfare? This is the central question that this monograph will attempt to answer.

David Chandler maintains that "Napoleon contributed little new." As we struggle today with the implications of a possible RMA, it is important that we fully understand the forces that caused former RMA's to occur. For the historian, it is also important that we get our interpretations of past events as correct as possible. Was this a RMA that would have happened with any energetic leader who strictly followed the teachings of Bourcet and Guibert, as a sort of TTP put together by theorists, or did Napoleon take their theories, and meld them with his own ideas to create a new form of warfare and initiate a RMA? Does a true RMA require more than just theories and doctrine, does it require an inquiring mind on the part of the practitioner as well? These questions give relevance to the research question of this monograph.

The writings of Bourcet and Guibert, and their influence on Napoleon's conduct of operational warfare, and the development and utilization of the *corps d'armee* system, have not received a thorough examination since Chandler published *The Campaigns of Napoleon* in 1966. This monograph will perform that task by analyzing Bourcet's *Principes de la Guerre de Montagnes*, and Guibert's *General Essay on Tactics*, and then examining the linkage from these writings to Napoleon's approach to campaigns and battles. A full examination of the writings of these two 18th century military theorists will provide a synthesis of the salient features of their thinking that affected Napoleon's operational methods. Using this synthesis as a basis for evaluation, I will attempt to show the linkages between their ideas and Napoleon's operational systems and methods. An examination of Napoleon's operational employment of his system in the 1805 Ulm campaign will provide the opportunity to evaluate the linkage between the early theorists and Napoleon in action.

The monograph concludes that Napoleon did not imitate the two thinkers, and that the RMA initiated by him was more than just an implementation of techniques proposed by theorists. The RMA in 1805 required an imaginative practitioner who could grasp the salient features of theory and put them to use in new ways. To initiate the RMA innovation by the war fighter was required, not mere imitation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1805, a new style of operational warfare burst upon the fields of Europe as Napoleon Bonaparte's Grand Army swept from the Rhine to the Danube surrounding the Austrian army at Ulm and initiating a revolution in military affairs (RMA) whose effects are still felt today. The question remains whether this new style of warfare was merely a natural outgrowth of the work of 18th century military thinkers, such as Bourcet and Guibert, whose theories were imitated by a dynamic leader, or did Napoleon bring something new to warfare, a true innovation in the conduct of operational warfare? This is the central question that this monograph will attempt to answer.

Why should we bother with what appears to be such an esoteric question? What relevance can this subject have to military professionals today? While pondering the relevance of this work to today's Army, it struck me that there are two areas, other than my self-indulgence, in which the relevance of this monograph can be found. The first has to do with the nature of change in military affairs. As we struggle today with the implications of a possible RMA, it is important that we fully understand the forces that caused former RMA's to occur. For the military historian, it is also important that we get our interpretations of past events as correct as possible. Was this a RMA that would have happened with any energetic leader who strictly followed the teachings of Bourcet and Guibert, or did Napoleon take their theories, and meld them with his own ideas to create a new form of warfare and initiate a RMA?

The second area is a bit more ambiguous. It concerns the effects of a critical analysis of theories, and an educated and informed application of features of these theories, leavened with experience, intuition and knowledge of the current situation, as opposed to a more rigid and dogmatic application of theory as a sort of "tactic, technique and procedure (TTP)." The one requires a practitioner at ease with nuances and general trends of thought. One who can take salient features of theory, and shape them to fit unforeseen circumstances, one who can see new possibilities for application to circumstances which the theorist never visualized. In short, one who can absorb the ideas of others, molding, changing, and discarding parts, in order to create a totally new form of application through innovation. The second requires one who is knowledgeable of the application of his trade, but need not be comfortable with nuances and ill-defined terms. For he will see in theory that which can be applied as is. He is more comfortable with clearly defined terms and definitions, and has less need of intuition for application of other's ideas. He may be uncomfortable with the application of theory to a situation which the theorist had not foreseen and explained, for his forte is the imitation of techniques and procedures.

The Army is full of both types of these practitioners. While we pride ourselves on being a non-dogmatic army, and nurturing initiative and innovation, our institutional trend from peacetime evaluation programs such as the Combat Training Centers (CTC) and Battle Command Training Program (BCTP), based on the proper application of techniques and doctrine, is often to reward the imitator of techniques and procedures over the innovator. None will deny the value of imitation of "tried and true" techniques,

especially at the lower levels of command where experience is low, but imitation can too often lead to predictability. Seldom has a predictable commander achieved decisive results unless possessed of overwhelming forces or faced by a much less competent opponent. Innovation, on the other hand, is invariably risky. While the Army officially sanctions and promotes innovation through its Army Warfighting Experiments (AWE), innovation that deviates from current “doctrine” and approved TTP’s during normal rotations through these programs runs a high risk of criticism for not following approved procedures. Although the training programs do not officially evaluate and penalize commanders for not following approved “doctrine” and procedures, the practical effect on a commander who receives comments of this nature can be truly detrimental to his career, making the choice for innovation a high risk adventure. These questions, the role of imitation or innovation in the emergence of RMAs, and of achieving decisive results in battle, give relevance to the research question of this monograph.

Two names among the many military theorists of the eighteenth century stand out above the others, Pierre-Joseph de Bourcet and Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert. Both men were involved in the Seven Year’s War and both had a profound influence upon Napoleon. Bourcet’s *Principes de la Guerre de Montagnes*, written around 1771 while he was director of the French staff school at Grenoble, emphasized mobility, the importance of branches in campaign plans, and fused the concept of campaigns with battle. Bourcet’s work was circulated among French officers, but was never published for fear that it might fall into the hands of a potential enemy.¹ Guibert’s

General Essay on Tactics, published in 1772, “concentrated on the maneuver of armies and on the conduct of battle.”²

Napoleon read and re-read the works of these two thinkers and incorporated their theories into his method of warfare. In fact most historians believe that the salient features of Napoleonic warfare were drawn from the theories of these two men. So emerges the question, did Napoleon merely imitate the ideas of Bourcet and Guibert, or was he an innovator? Martin Van Creveld believed that while the 1805 campaign “was a direct outgrowth of these experiments [18th century theories of Bourcet and Guibert],” it was also “completely new and unprecedented.”³ On the other hand, David Chandler, in his monumental work on Napoleonic warfare, maintains that “Napoleon contributed little new.”⁴

The writings of Bourcet and Guibert, and their influence on Napoleon’s conduct of operational warfare, and the development and utilization of the *corps d’armee* system, have not received a thorough examination since David Chandler published *The Campaigns of Napoleon* in 1966. This monograph will perform that task by analyzing Bourcet’s *Principes de la Guerre de Montagnes*, and Guibert’s *General Essay on Tactics*, and then examining the linkage from these writings to Napoleon’s approach to campaigns and battles. A full examination of the writings of these two 18th century military theorists will provide a synthesis of the salient features of their thinking that affected Napoleon’s operational methods. Using this synthesis as a basis for evaluation, I will attempt to show the linkages between their ideas and Napoleon’s operational systems and methods. This will include an examination of Napoleon’s operational and

grand tactical methods of employing forces. An examination of Napoleon's operational employment of his system in the 1805 Ulm campaign will provide the opportunity to evaluate the linkage between the early theorists and Napoleon in action.

BOURCET

Napoleon's style of operational warfare was very much influenced by the writings of Pierre de Bourcet (1700-1780). Considered by many to be the greatest chief of staff, Bourcet was never able to command an army because he was not born into the high nobility. Although unable to command, he influenced many of the mid-eighteenth century campaigns as a principal advisor to a number of generals, and his advice was sought by virtually all the French and Spanish commanders of his time. In 1764 Bourcet became the director of the newly established French school for staff officers, and it was here that he laid out his theories of warfare in his book *Principes de la guerre de montagnes* in 1771.⁵

His book was intended for the use of his students and was not published at the time since it was deemed too sensitive to allow other than French officers to have access to it. Manuscript copies were circulated among the students and in 1775 a copy was sent to the Ministry of War where it was privately printed, but not published, over 100 years later. One of the most significant outcomes of Bourcet's writing, was the effect it had on a young artillery lieutenant stationed at the French Artillery Training School in Auxonne, Napoleon Bonaparte. While studying at Auxonne, Napoleon read and re-read the works of many of the thinkers of his day as well as the histories of the great military commanders of the past, and Bourcet's writings had a profound influence on him that would be directly reflected in the new style of warfare he would conduct across the continents of Europe and Africa for the next seventeen years.⁶

Principes de la guerre de montagnes, developed several themes that would influence Napoleon, but principal among these are the concepts of sub-dividing and reuniting the army, an emphasis on dispersion to deceive the enemy followed by rapid concentration, plans of campaign which fuse the concept of campaign with battle, the necessity to keep one's enemy in the dark as to one's true intentions, the necessity to consider all of the enemy's options when planning a campaign, and the necessity of having a flexible plan which has several branches that can respond to changing situations. Breaking with the concepts that dominated most eighteenth century military campaigns, Bourcet saw warfare as something more dynamic and flowing than did most of his contemporaries. To him success could best be attained by deceiving the enemy through carefully calculated dispersion and the use of diversions in order to approach the decisive point indirectly, and then rapidly reuniting the army there before the enemy could do the same. This method would give a general a "force superiority at the decisive point."⁷ The skillfully crafted dispersion would also allow a commander to respond to changing situations so that he could concentrate in multiple directions. An enemy commander would be forced to protect all threatened points, and not knowing the true objective of the approaching army, would not be able to complete his own concentration to meet the overwhelming blow.

Bourcet advocated dividing a force for offensive operations so that it could march along several routes or *débouchés*. The size of each column would be decided upon based on the nature of the intended route and its ability to support the movement of troops and to provide communications between the various columns. Each column

would be positioned in such a way as to enable it to come to the aid of its neighbor.

Bourcet saw this division of the army into separate columns as merely an operational or tactical tool. While the columns may be semi-independent, the army as a whole was still a unitary body not unlike most eighteenth century armies.⁸

The use of various routes gave the army several advantages over the enemy. The front occupied by the army would be extensive and may cover twenty-five to thirty miles. This facilitated diversions away from the intended point of attack and threatened several points at once. It hid from the enemy the real objective of the plan and made him protect all points so that he could not concentrate at any one. By marching in this way, the general could concentrate his army at the chosen point by marches with the separate columns arriving there at almost the same time. "This method hides from the enemy the exact point that one has determined to strike and the objective of the campaign plan, and menaces all points of the front where one can operate, and the army can reach any of them in almost the same amount of time."⁹ The idea of threatening several points at once and deceiving the enemy as to the point one wishes to attack, is central to Bourcet's theories and Napoleon's style of warfare.

While Bourcet advocated this dispersion of forces for mountain campaigns, he was less quick to embrace the idea when operating in the plains as he felt it may be dangerous. To make this dispersion work it was necessary that certain precautions be taken. Foremost among these was the need to maintain secure communications between the various columns. As a column approached a cross route which connected to a neighboring column's line of advance it would be necessary that this cross link be

secured and the column not advance until its neighbor had reached this lateral communication link. This would prevent the enemy from interposing itself between the two columns and falling upon the rear or flank of one while preventing the other from coming to its aid. Aides de camp would be used to maintain communications between the officers of the columns and to ensure that they could cooperate with one another. This gave the army a great degree of flexibility as any column could be alerted to come to the immediate aid of its neighbor if attacked.¹⁰

Bourcet implies that his method of maneuvering in dispersed columns that cooperated with each other, and could concentrate rapidly at the intended point of attack, allowed a general to concentrate his army on the battlefield once the battle was underway if necessary. This concentration during battle was facilitated by columns sufficiently robust to engage the enemy along their line of march for a period of time while neighboring columns hurried to their aid. The reinforcing columns could position themselves advantageously against the enemy and present the enemy with a concentrated opponent when he thought he was facing a lone detachment. To accomplish this type of mutual support it was paramount that the commanders of the columns be familiar with, and have taken precautions to secure the roads and communications between the two. This concentration during battle would be one of the salient features of Napoleon's style of warfare that would so confound his opponents.¹¹

Bourcet also stressed the need for each column to march in order of battle. As a matter of fact he mentions the need to do this no less than three times and elevates it to a maxim.¹² The emphasis on marching in order of battle reveals Bourcet's belief that

battle and campaigning are not completely distinct ideas or phases, but rather that one must merge with the other. Warfare could be made by marching in such a way that battle could be brought on under favorable conditions which the enemy would be unable to avoid. The system gave a fluid and dynamic operational movement to the armies which they had not enjoyed before, and allowed the commander a great amount of flexibility in his plans to meet unexpected circumstances. In essence, Bourcet devised a plan which fused marching (campaigns) with battle, and so introduced an idea that would be broadened by Napoleon and would forever change the nature of warfare.

Plans of campaign were essential elements of Bourcet's theories. "Once the objective of a war is declared, it will always be necessary to form a plan of campaign."¹³ Acknowledging that the campaign plan must subordinate itself to political goals, Bourcet stressed that these plans must be developed in such a way as to facilitate several branches and must be made with the enemy's possible options in mind. With his emphasis on the enemy, Bourcet portrayed warfare as truly dynamic where one's opponent played an important role in plans for campaign. Bourcet recognized the role of the enemy's free will long before Clausewitz.¹⁴

Bourcet emphasized that once a general has assembled his army, he must take into account the dispositions of the enemy. His plan must account for whether the enemy has already assembled his army, or whether he has only begun to give the orders for the assembly of his army at the threatened point. If the enemy is just beginning to assemble it will be necessary to fix his forces so that he does not have the freedom to assemble elsewhere than on the line of operations he first chose. If the enemy is already assembled

it becomes easy to forecast the dispositions he can make. But the offensive general must be ready to change his plans if the enemy is able to assemble in a place which threatens the offensive's line of operation. Plans of campaign depend upon all of these initial dispositions. But, while considering all of these dispositions of forces and the obstacles he may face, the general must consider that the enemy commander will have taken the same measures, and that he will be prepared for all events.¹⁵

Once operations commenced Bourcet felt that the offensive general would lose some of the advantage that was gained by his knowledge of the true objective of his advance, because now he would be unsure of the enemy's reaction to his movements. His plan of campaign must therefore incorporate many branches that allow him to react to the enemy activities, as he may be compelled to adopt a quite different plan. In addition to the necessity of branches within a campaign plan, Bourcet stressed the need for diversions fully nested with the main operations and included in the branches. This according to Liddell-Hart, is "Bourcet's cardinal principle--one of his most valuable contributions to the theory of war--was that 'a plan ought to have several branches'."¹⁶ The plan and each branch must take into account all that the general will face, the terrain, his troops, the weather, obstacles and the enemy. Once he has considered all of these and decided upon a course of action, he must make liberal use of diversions and ruses to hide his true intentions from the enemy. If the ruses and diversions fail, he must be ready to adopt another branch to his plan, and a second and a third if necessary, without allowing the enemy time to reflect upon the new plan.¹⁷

Bourcet introduced Napoleon to a new concept in warfare through his writings. This new approach to operations emphasized an organizational adjustment that allowed dispersion to deceive the enemy and rapid concentration to overwhelm him. It stressed the need to march in order of battle while on campaign, which coupled with the ability of an army to expand and contract while marching through dispersion and concentration, fused the concepts of campaign with battle, and created a new fluid style of operations. He stressed the free will of the enemy and the need for a plan of campaign which took account of the enemy's options, and emphasized the importance of a plan with several branches. This was the legacy that Bourcet bequeathed to Napoleon.

GUIBERT

Along with the writings of Bourcet, those of Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, comte de Guibert greatly influenced the young Napoleon Bonaparte. Unlike Bourcet, Guibert's writings were widely read and not restricted to the French Officer Corps. His thoughts ranged from petty tactics to grand strategy and many have regarded him as the "most influential of all the military writers of eighteenth-century France."¹⁸ Indeed his writings greatly influenced the French tactical manual, the *Ordinance of 1791*, which would remain in force throughout the Napoleonic Wars. The mobile warfare which he advocated would be expanded upon by Bonaparte to the great detriment and chagrin of his opponents.¹⁹

Born into the French nobility, Guibert was only twenty-nine years old when he "first rose to public notice by winning a prize for his *Essai de tactique générale*" in 1772.²⁰ Seven years later, in defense against his critics, he published his *Defense du systeme de guerre moderne* (1779). He owed much of his military education to his father, who served as Marshal Broglie's chief of staff in the Seven Years War. The young Guibert accompanied his father as he served on the staff of the Army of the Lower Rhine in 1759. The older Bourcet also served with Broglie at this time, and it is likely that the two met. It is certain that Guibert was familiar with Bourcet's works and found them enlightening.²¹

Swept up in the military reform spirit in France following the peace of 1763, Guibert sought to bring more mobility, fluidity and flexibility to warfare. He railed against the practice of moving massive armies along one column in a pre-determined order of battle. This system caused the deployment for battle to be cumbersome and time consuming, restricted a general's capability to maneuver for advantage, and minimized the flexibility to take advantage of changing situations. Furthermore, the time required to deploy an army in this manner allowed the enemy ample time to adjust his dispositions or to retire from the field.²² In his works he proposed a system to overcome these obstacles that embraced both tactical changes and what he called grand tactics. It is the latter upon which we will concentrate, as it is most directly related to Napoleon's operational concepts. The two major themes that he developed were the necessity of dividing an army into divisions, and the exploitation of the resultant increase in mobility and maneuverability.

As an advocate of dividing the army into separate entities, Guibert was not proposing something radically new. Marshal Broglie had employed the system in Germany.²³ What Guibert saw in the division of the army into several like columns was a prescription for bringing mobility to warfare. "The army should, if possible, be divided into several corps, which should be reunited at, or near the destined point of its arrival."²⁴ For Guibert, it was the division of the army into separate parts that would facilitate movement of the whole, allowing each division to march along its own route. "To move it in body, it would be unwieldy and slow, incapable of executing great maneuvers; divide it into several corps, each will act in a detached manner with more order and

celerity; all these corps may act at once, and concur to the execution of a general movement.” It should be noted that Guibert uses the word *corps*, meaning unit, body or group, and not the term *corps d’armée* which is the equivalent of our conception of an army corps.²⁵

The division of the army which Guibert proposed, was not to be haphazard or temporary, but should be standardized and permanent. Each division was to be commanded by a General and each was to be equal to the others. As the army moved each division would form a march column which marched on its own route. Beyond the greater mobility generated by marching in several columns, the system facilitated a more rapid transition from the march order to a battle line. The dispersed routes of march allowed each column to arrive at the battlefield in its proper station in relation to the battle line of the army as a whole. This in turn, would greatly diminish the time necessary to deploy for battle and would create a fluidity to warfare as marching merged with battle.²⁶

Guibert saw the use of divisions as principally a means of simplifying marches and accelerating “those movements by which an army forms in battle.” To accomplish these tasks, he advised against making the divisions too large or too small. If the divisions were too large then they would fall victim to the same circumstances his theory hoped to avoid in armies as a whole. They would become unwieldy and take too long in forming for battle. If the divisions were too small, then there would be too many of them to find sufficient routes for marching. He proposed that an army be divided into three or four divisions of infantry and two wings of cavalry. The divisions should consist of no

more than twenty-four battalions and no less than twelve. Although he allowed for the attachment of artillery, his divisions were not combined arms organizations as they would have no cavalry.²⁷

Guibert's proposed system was designed to allow a commander greater flexibility in forming his line of battle, and most importantly for this to be done from the march, based upon the terrain and the enemy dispositions. While he asserted that the divisions should be equal, and each should march as a single column on one route, he was not dogmatic in this approach and allowed a flexible adjustment to the situation. Indeed, he stressed that it was the sameness of the divisions which provided a commander the means to adopt in an instant any order of battle he felt necessary to engage the enemy. "[By the march orders of the columns being equal], the General acquires the facility of combining, in an instant, and in the face of the enemy, any order of battle he thinks best."²⁸ If necessary the commander could double the number of divisions in one column or divide one division among two columns as the situation dictated.

Like Bourcet, Guibert insisted that the disposition of the enemy should guide a commander on how to approach a battle, and that battle plans should not be drawn up ahead of time with no regard to the enemy force and commander. According to Robert Quimby the essence of Guibert's theory of warfare conducted by the maneuver of columns can be summed up in one passage from the *Essai de tactique générale*.

Thus disposed, the army advances, the General being in front, at the head of the advanced guard. Arrived within reach of the enemy, the General determines his order of battle according to ground, the position the enemy occupies, and the disposition he has taken. For which reason, he either draughts, or reinforces such or such columns he judges best, advancing one, leaving another in the rear, directing this towards one point, that towards another, and gives the word for action. Those troops trained to the execution of great maneuvers, having rapid

methods of extension, form in battle in an instant, and the attack is begun before the enemy has time to distinguish the point where the blow is intended, or supposing it has discovered this point, it has no time to change its disposition to ward it off. But what is there, the General cannot possibly effect, having, in a reserve at his rear, the columns entirely subject to operate what he commands, therefore ready to take the disposition he judges best.²⁹

This doctrine of warfare enabled a commander to use the resultant mobility to attack the enemy at an advantage. Always disdainful of a frontal attack, Guibert stressed that through the maneuvering of columns, a general should seek to concentrate against a weak spot, or gain the enemy's flank or rear. This was a technique that would be perfected and used time and time again by Napoleon. Guibert emphasized the desirability of attacking a flank or the rear of the enemy on no less than three separate occasions in his *Essai*. "Transport the army on the flank or rear of the enemy, attack it on any other point than the front of its position, which is that, where it premeditates its disposition of defence, and where the ground is advantageous to it."³⁰

He recognized that these maneuvers could only be accomplished by an army organized into divisions capable of supporting one another and all moving toward "the same object, of forming in battle and attacking the enemy."³¹ The separation of the army into divisions would allow a commander to pin down the front of an enemy army with one or several divisions, while the others marched against its flank or rear. He believed that it was a rare occasion that an enemy army would occupy a position that could not be turned by such a march on its flank or rear.³²

Besides organizing the army into divisions, Guibert proposed that the army must strip itself of much of the equipage with which the armies of his time were encumbered. Particularly he felt that the mobility he desired could never be achieved by armies tied to

a system of magazines for subsistence. Guibert argued that officers should be knowledgeable of the details of subsistence and that the army should make use of the resources of the land where it was operating. Thus less encumbered by baggage and magazines, the army would be free to fully exploit its divisional organization to wage a war based on mobility and speed.³³

Unlike Bourcet whose focus was campaign plans, Guibert was focused on plans of battle. His system was designed to allow a commander to rapidly form a battle line in such a manner that he would gain a decided tactical advantage over his opponent. He still viewed the army as a unitary unit and his concept of dispersion was limited. The dispersion provided by divisions moving along separate routes was dispersion only in a grand tactical sense. His examples of maneuvering all concern a grand tactical deployment of a unitary army for combat, not the coordinated movement of semi-independent *corps d'armées* operating with a common aim. For example, according to Guibert, the vanguard of an army should not be more than one and one-half miles ahead of the following columns, although he does allow that there may be circumstances where it is desirable to allow a greater distance between the columns.³⁴

He was adamant that the final order of battle should not be decided upon until the enemy was within sight, but he still advocated the deployment into order of battle before engaging the enemy. To him, concentration occurred before battle, not during and on the battlefield. Although a flanking division may suddenly appear in the enemy's rear during the battle, this division's position was set before the battle commenced as soon as the commanding general had determined upon the dispositions he judged best. This limited

dispersion hardly resembles the operational dispersion accomplished by Napoleon or advocated by Bourcet.³⁵

Guibert advocated a much more fluid and mobile style of warfare than had been conducted previously in Europe. His brand of warfare was centered on a divisionally organized army with great maneuverability, and the capability to move swiftly from the march to order of battle. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Napoleon was this idea of merging marching into battle. But, Guibert was still a slave to his time, and other than his views on providing subsistence for the army, he offered very little new for campaign planning. He continued to view the army as a unitary whole, and in this regard his views are much more in line with Frederick the Great than Napoleon.

NAPOLÉON'S OPERATIONAL APPROACH

Napoleon's operational approach to war, fully developed by 1805, was a drastic change from the style of warfare conducted during the latter part of the eighteenth century. The predominate style at that time was a "*system of positions*", and defined by Baron Henri Jomini as "... the old manner of conducting a methodical war, with armies in tents, with their supplies at hand, engaged in watching each other."³⁶ Those who still adhered to this manner of limited warfare received a tremendous shock in 1805 when Napoleon's *Grand Armée* swept from the Rhine to the Danube. Napoleon's new style was quick and bloody, sought a decisive engagement, and was characterized by "... its limitless variation and flexibility."³⁷ Until at least 1807, Napoleon's operational approach and organization created an asymmetrical situation between the armies of France and her adversaries which gave Napoleon a distinct advantage until his enemies began to learn his methods and adapt to them.

Many pages have been devoted to analysis of Napoleon's art of war, probably the best known and most extensive is David Chandler's work. Scot Bowden, Hubert Camon, Owen Connelly, Robert Epstein, J.F.C. Fuller, Sir Basil Liddell-Hart, Antoine Henri Jomini, Robert Quimby and many others have also leant their fertile minds to analyzing and describing the RMA that came full force in the early 1800's on the plains of Europe. Most of these works stress some aspects of Napoleonic warfare over others, and some are diametrically opposed to one another on issues of his system of war. The problem with

defining his operational approach “is that Napoleon never really *formulated* a precise system of war--at least not on paper.”³⁸ A careful analysis of his campaigns, his correspondence, and the work done by previous scholars reveals some general trends that I believe are characteristic of his operational methods and show a well formulated, and even shared system of operational warfare. This system was marked by detailed planning and clearly focused operational objectives, flexibility, dispersion of forces followed by rapid concentration, high mobility and tempo, a merging of campaigning with battle, and forcing battle under favorable conditions. To make this system of warfare function Napoleon had several tools other than his own genius and force of will: a sophisticated organizational structure, a streamlined logistical system, and a shared doctrine between his commanders.

One of the hallmarks of a Napoleonic campaign was detailed planning. As soon as war was decided upon, or even the possibility of war arose, Napoleon would begin an extremely thorough planning process. Nothing was to be left to chance. Gathering all the resources of information on his opponent that his librarian could find, he would begin to develop a mental picture, not only of the terrain and opposing army, but also of the opposing commander. This thorough and exhausting work allowed him to consider all of the possible actions his opponent could likely take, and to plan for them accordingly. “He invariably created a hypothetical plan of action, involving the most complicated military situation his fertile brain could devise, given the known strength, alliances, and *penchants* of the possible adversary.”³⁹ Furthermore, his plans were always directed toward a clearly focused objective, attacking and eliminating the enemy field army.⁴⁰

“All wars should be governed by certain principles, for every war should have a definite object, and be conducted according to the rules of art. War should only be undertaken with forces proportioned to the obstacles to be overcome.”⁴¹

Napoleon expressed the necessity of detailed planning in his correspondence on several occasions. The need to think through a problem thoroughly, to plan ahead, to consider all the possibilities, and plan for the worst case were ideas that he continually stressed to his subordinates. Writing to Joseph Bonaparte in 1806 he advised that “in war nothing is gained except through calculation. That which is not profoundly meditated in its details will produce nothing.”⁴² “It is with plans deeply thought out that one is successful in war.”⁴³ “I usually think three or four months out about what I must do, and I calculate on the worst case.”⁴⁴ To Marshal Berthier in 1804 he echoed these sentiments, “At the moment that war is declared, there are so many things to do, that it is wise to have considered them several years in advance.”⁴⁵ The picture that emerges from these writings is a of a dynamic planning system. Napoleon’s plans did much more than consider what options he could choose, but rather they visualized war as a dynamic exchange, where his opponent played a real role. Recognizing that his adversary would be trying to out fight and out maneuver him, Napoleon developed plans which considered all the options available to his enemy and were designed to respond to the worst possible situation.

A natural outgrowth of this detailed planning system was built in flexibility. While his campaign plan was the result of detailed analysis, it “. . . was no hard and fast set of rules for the conduct of forthcoming operations; rather it was the ‘mean’ or

standard against which all actual events and adjustments could be measured and their effect assessed.”⁴⁶ Flexibility was one of the most characteristic features of a Napoleonic campaign. After drawing up his “master plan” and considering all the possibilities, he would dispose his forces in such a way as to meet any eventuality. Indeed the organization of his force, which we will discuss in the following pages, was designed to provide him with operational flexibility, the likes of which had never been seen before. “Plans of campaign may be modified *ad infinitum* according to circumstances, the genius of the general, the character of the troops, and the features of the country.”⁴⁷ His plans allowed him to operate in the fog of war, with little or faulty intelligence and made use of branches to the main plan.⁴⁸ Because of this, it mattered little where the enemy was discovered while on campaign, or what he was trying to do. Napoleon’s flexible campaign plans, with their branches, allowed him to respond quickly as the situation became more clear and developed.

Napoleon’s campaigns in the period from 1805 to 1807 were marked by a careful dispersion of his forces as he approached the enemy army, followed by a rapid concentration which would provide him with a superior force on the battlefield. This careful dispersion of troops was designed to deceive the enemy as to his true objective, and to force his adversary to scatter his forces in order to protect all sectors. While marching, the dispersion of his forces was deceptive, as each column was so placed as to be able to march to the aid of its neighbor if necessary. As a campaign opened his army might be dispersed to cover a distance of over 200 miles, but this frontage was shrunk significantly as he approached the enemy.⁴⁹ Stealing a march, Napoleon was able to

reunite his separate forces before the enemy could do the same, forcing his surprised adversary into combat at a distinct disadvantage.

Central to this method were the concepts of assembly and concentration. "By assembly, Napoleon meant the placing of his major units within marching distance of the intended place of battle, though not necessarily their physical presence in contact with the enemy or one another."⁵⁰ This dispersion, as already noted, hid Napoleon's true intention from his enemy, but it also provided him the flexibility to meet any unforeseen circumstance or to provide a flanking force for the battle. By concentration Napoleon meant the joining of forces at, or during the battle itself. Napoleon might concentrate before the battle proper, or in many cases he would concentrate his forces once the battle was joined by part of his force. In this way he could pin the enemy down with a small portion of his force, the *masse primaire*, while another portion, the *masse de manoeuvre*, maneuvered for a tactical advantage against the enemy flank or rear.⁵¹

Napoleon's ability to concentrate before his adversaries could do the same was a result of his organizational structure which facilitated mobility and maneuver, and his insistence on speed and a high tempo of operations. As Napoleon's army approached the enemy, he would rely on speed to rapidly concentrate before his "dazed opponent" could recognize the immediate danger. At this point the "length of the daily marches would be abruptly increased, and all foraging forbidden This insistence on speed and mobility was a basic feature of the Emperor's campaigns from beginning to end, and was the feature of his warfare that most confused and unsettled the majority of his opponents."⁵²

What Napoleon may have lacked in numbers, he made up for through speed. The

rapidity of his marches allowed him to concentrate the larger force at the decisive battle, even if his opponent outnumbered him overall. The example of Davout who marched his leading division over 140 kilometers in just over 48 hours to join Napoleon at Austerlitz highlights the emphasis on speed in Napoleon's army. Speed and tempo were critical elements to his style of war, and he made repeated reference to this in his correspondence. "Strategy is the art of making use of time and space. . . ; space we can recover, time never . . ." ⁵³

Through careful dispersion, detailed planning, increased mobility and speed, Napoleon was able to implement the ideas of Bourcet and Guibert on a higher level by merging campaigning with battle. A Napoleonic Campaign, including the decisive battle and pursuit, was now visualized as one continuous operation, possessed of a certain fluid motion as it unfolded. Napoleon fought with his marches as much as he did with his guns, as one of his soldiers remarked during the Ulm campaign, "The Emperor has found a new method of making war, he makes use of our legs and not our bayonets." ⁵⁴ This merging of campaign with battle on a strategic scale was designed "to create by campaign maneuver a tactical situation favorable to the French before battle began and to follow up with a battlefield victory so crushing as to render the state incapable of further resistance." ⁵⁵ Furthermore, this style and scale of campaigning prevented enemy armies from being able to avoid fighting as it was difficult to maneuver out of the way of such a widespread and rapidly advancing net.

The two operational maneuvers which Napoleon most favored for forcing and creating a favorable situation for a decisive battle were the *manoeuvre sur les derrières*

and the strategy of the central position. In short the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* was a flanking maneuver that sought to envelope the enemy, cutting his lines of communication and forcing him to fight at a disadvantage or surrender. The strategy of the central position was used to take advantage of interior lines between two separated enemy forces, so that by maneuvering in these interior lines the two enemy forces could be defeated piece-meal. Both of these maneuvers will now be described in turn.⁵⁶

According to Chandler, Napoleon used the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* “no less than thirty times between 1796 and 1815 and [it] was designed to crush a single enemy army which had strayed out of close supporting distance of its allies or supporting forces.”⁵⁷ Napoleon would first pin the foe with a feint and then march his main army, keeping it carefully hidden with his cavalry, so that his main force could place itself on the enemy’s flank or rear. After occupying a strategic curtain blocking position in the enemy rear, he would isolate the enemy force and then bear down on it “relentlessly” forcing his foe to fight or surrender. The moral effect was devastating, as the enemy commander was taken by surprise, and he and his army demoralized upon discovering that their lines of communication were severed, with the main French army in their rear isolating them from any help or support. In order to accomplish this it was necessary that the pinning force be sufficiently strong to withstand the enemy’s assaults should he attempt to break out of the trap.⁵⁸

If the enemy tried to strike at the communications of the flanking force he would find that because of its lean logistic system, Napoleon’s army was generally undisturbed by a temporary disruption of its lines of communication when this close to the enemy.

Furthermore, this action would divide the enemy force as the opposing general would have to leave forces to watch not only the pinning force, but Napoleon's main force as well. If the enemy was successful in assaulting the pinning force, he would only be placing himself deeper into the French trap, further away from his base of supply, with Napoleon and the main French Army in his rear. If he chose to turn and face the main French force "... he was conforming exactly to the Emperor's wishes--by accepting action on unfamiliar ground, with his morale shaken and in all probability his formations scattered by the chaos and muddle of a precipitate withdrawal."⁵⁹ Finally, to preclude any supporting forces from coming to the victim's aid, Napoleon would designate a *corps d'observation* to block any probable approaches of an enemy supporting army until his foe was destroyed. It was a no win situation for anyone so trapped in the *Grande Armée's* snare.

When Napoleon was faced by two or more enemy armies supporting each other, he often adopted the strategy of the central position as his form of maneuver. This strategy would allow Napoleon to offset a numerical superiority of the combined enemy forces, by dealing with each separate force, against which he could often produce superior numbers, one at a time. Instead of a single decisive blow, the strategy of the central position featured a series of successive blows against isolated elements of the enemy armies, so that each could be defeated in detail.

To conduct this maneuver Napoleon would first descend upon the hinge of the two armies; that place where the respective boundaries of operations met. After assaulting this position full force Napoleon would be concentrated in the central position

between the two so that they could not support each other except on exterior lines and have much greater distances to march in order to be in a position to help one another.⁶⁰

Once he made himself master of the interior lines, Napoleon would turn the bulk of his force against one of the separated forces, usually the force closest to him. He would then detach a *corps d'observation* to ensure the neighboring enemy army could not come to the aid of his first intended victim. Once the first target was isolated from outside aid, Napoleon would immediately march to engage and destroy it with a concentrated, superior force. After the first army was defeated, he would detach a force to conduct a pursuit to ensure it could not intervene in the next phase as he shifted the bulk of his forces to concentrate with his *corps d'observation* to repeat the spectacle against the second foe. "All being well, after two or three days of constant fighting and maneuver the various parts of the enemy forces would have been soundly drubbed in turn, and the general strategic situation would undoubtedly swing to the French advantage."⁶¹

Of course, in keeping with Napoleon's general philosophy, both of these maneuvers were marked by infinite variety and flexibility. In fact the two could be used in conjunction with one another, whereby using the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* against his first foe, Napoleon could place himself in the operational central position versus the enemy force as a whole. On a grand scale the campaigns of Ulm and Austerlitz might be viewed as a single campaign in which Napoleon occupied the central position and defeated the forces in detail. Although it is a stretch of the imagination to view these campaigns as one of the central position, in which Napoleon used a maneuver to the rear

of an Austrian army at Ulm to place himself in the central position between that force and the other Austrian and Russian armies approaching from the east, it is a useful illustration of the possibilities and flexibility which his system offered.

Finally, to understand how Napoleon managed to employ his system of warfare so productively it is necessary to recognize the tools he had to enable it. The three most striking features of Napoleon's armies which facilitated his style of warfare were the organization of the army into *corps d'armée*, his logistical system, and a shared operational doctrine. Without these enablers, Napoleon could have never conducted warfare in the manner that he did from 1805 until 1807 or 1809. These tools distinguished his army from all others at the time and allowed him to conduct asymmetrical warfare against his foes.

In March 1800, Napoleon ordered the formation of the *corps d'armée* on a permanent basis. The corps was composed of all arms of the service, was self-sustaining, and could fight on its own until other corps could join in the battle. The corps itself was a headquarters to which units could be attached. It might have attached two to four divisions of infantry with their organic artillery, it had its own cavalry division and corps artillery, plus support units. With this organization a corps was expected to be able to hold its ground against, or fight off an enemy army for a least a day, when neighboring corps could come to its aid.⁶² "Well handled , it can fight or alternatively avoid action, and maneuver according to circumstances without any harm coming to it, because an opponent cannot force it to accept an engagement but if it chooses to do so it can fight alone for a long time."⁶³

Napoleon's corps was in fact a small army into itself. Its size usually ranged from 20,000 to 40,000 men. An army composed of such units could make use of multiple routes of advance which increased the ability to live off the land. This in turn permitted the French army to move fast and far, to threaten many points and deceive the enemy as to its true objective. The internal organization of the corps and the doctrine of moving within 1 or 2 days march of one another provided protection from the separate corps being overwhelmed piecemeal.⁶⁴

The adoption of the *corps d'armée* system allowed Napoleon to make use of several different strategic formations for an advance: echelon, with one wing refused; wedge; *en potencé*, in which one wing was reinforced; and the *bataillon carré*, or battalion square in which the separate corps would march along parallel roads with designated corps acting as an advance guard, left flank, right flank, and a reserve, and the cavalry carefully screening the movement of the army as a whole. These formations threatened the enemy with attack from many directions and allowed Napoleon to operate with uncertain information as to the exact location of the enemy army. His formation allowed him to engage the enemy in any direction with at least one corps, while the others converged on the battle.⁶⁵

Napoleon's logistic system took advantage of the dispersal of forces through the *corps d'armée* while on the march. Termed by some ramshackle logistics, his lean logistical tail freed him to move quickly and not be tied to magazines or be interrupted by temporary threats to his line of communication. With the Emperor's insistence upon speed, large wagon trains could not have kept up. French armies depended largely upon

local supplies gathered by systematic foraging. Each corps was allocated an area from which it could forage on the march so that no two corps were supplying themselves from the same area. This system, or "lack of a system" as Chandler describes it, was inherited by Napoleon from the Revolutionary armies. "Although by 1805 the First Empire could have provided as much food for its troops as was needed, Napoleon deliberately adopted the old, desperate methods; the army that marched to the Danube carried merely eight days' rations with it -- and these were issued only when the enemy was close at hand."⁶⁶

The last tool which Napoleon had to enable his style of warfare was a shared doctrine between his senior commanders. Although many scholars, especially Chandler and Fuller, have charged that one of Napoleon's shortcomings was his failure to explain his methods and plans to his subordinates, there is ample evidence that at the strategic and operational level he did just that through his correspondence and by practice. Robert Epstein makes just such a compelling argument in *Napoleon's Last Victory*. The evidence of the methods of Napoleon's subordinates, operating away from his direct guidance, certainly leads one to believe that Epstein is correct.⁶⁷

At the operational and tactical level Napoleon exercised a decentralized command within the army he was moving with. His corps commanders followed mission type orders, and were expected to operate in a semi-autonomous mode using their judgment to achieve a common goal. Once engaged, the corps commander was in charge of his fight, while the other commanders followed a standard procedure, or doctrine, of marching to the sound of the guns unless instructed otherwise.⁶⁸

Napoleon's style of warfare was fluid, intricate, rapid, and above all violent. As stated earlier, it was characterized by detailed planning, flexibility, dispersion followed by concentration, high tempo and mobility, merging campaign with battle, and forcing battle upon opponents. This method was enabled by his *corps d'armée* system, lean logistics, and a shared doctrine among his subordinates. As David Chandler said, "Napoleonic war was nothing if not complex -- an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of moves and intentions, which by themselves went a long way towards baffling and dazing his muddled, conventionally minded opponents into that state of disconcerting moral disequilibrium which so often resulted in their catastrophic defeat." ⁶⁹

THE 1805 ULM CAMPAIGN: THE NAPOLEONIC APPROACH IN ACTION

The campaign which began in the summer of 1805 and ended in October with the surrender of the main Austrian army on the Danube at Ulm is a good vehicle for providing examples of Napoleon's operational approach in action, and the new style of warfare proposed by Bourcet and Guibert. This campaign also highlights the differences between Napoleon's style of warfare and that of his less progressive opponents who were still conducting campaigns in the more "leisurely" style of warfare by position described by Jomini. The campaign which resulted in the battles of Ulm and later Austerlitz, and the campaign the following year against Prussia fully demonstrated to the world that a revolution in military affairs (RMA) had occurred in France and was being unleashed on the plains of Europe. The character of warfare was permanently changed and the virtual existence of nations was at risk as a result.

The armies of the French and the Allies bore little resemblance to one another in their make-up, organization, and methods. More importantly, the allied commanders and Napoleon approached the conduct of campaigns in drastically different ways. In the Russian and Austrian armies there was no permanent organization above the regiment. Officers for these units were selected by social standing and the capability to pay for their position. These armies were essentially the same as the armies of Frederick the Great. This lack of permanent organization above the regiment had consequences not only in the command structure, but also in training and logistics.⁷⁰

With no organization above regiment, the training of the allied armies never rose above the level of regimental drill. There were no realistic training scenarios that focused on the coordination of various regiments to support one another. Most importantly, this low level of training meant that the officer corps was deficient in maneuvering units above the regimental level, and that there were no tactical techniques developed for larger organizations in combat situations such as defense of a strongpoint. In short there was no shared doctrine above drill, and in the Russian army a supreme belief in the value of the bayonet over firepower.⁷¹

This unwieldy organization was further hampered by a large, slow moving logistical system. The logistics for the allied armies was designed to supply the army as a whole and to prevent it from having to live off the countryside where it operated. The soldiers were used to "receiving their accustomed cooked rations," even while on campaign. As a result, the allied armies were unitary, slow moving entities, commanded by officers with little training in the coordination of large battlefield formations, and no shared concepts on how to fight above the tactical level.⁷²

The leaders of the Third Coalition of Austria, England, and Russia, joined together to wage another war against Napoleon and restore the Bourbon monarchy to the throne of France in late spring of 1805. Believing that the French main effort would be in Italy, Austria deployed its largest force and most able commander there with the objective of destroying the French forces and capturing Milan. Along the Danube an Army of about 72,000 under Archduke Ferdinand and General Mack, was to invade Bavaria and await the arrival of approximately 70,000 Russian soldiers under Generals

Kutusov and Buxhöwden approaching from the east. Once the Austro-Russian forces were combined they would sweep westward to the Rhine and destroy the French forces there. The juncture of the two forces would require that the Russian forces join the Austrians before Napoleon could intervene, therefore speed was of the essence. Unfortunately speed was not something the armies of the Third Coalition were capable of. When Kutusov marched from Poland he averaged a “mere six miles a day!”⁷³

In contrast, by 1805 Napoleon had expanded upon the ideas of Bourcet and Guibert to organize and train a thoroughly “modern” army. Guibert’s divisional organization had been incorporated into the French army, but Napoleon took the concepts of organized dispersion well beyond the scale envisioned by the two thinkers with his development of the *corps d’armée*. Unlike Guibert’s division, the *corps d’armée* was a true combined arms organization of up to 25-30,000 troops, with the capability to provide its own screening force while maneuvering, and to fight a much larger opponent for an extended amount of time. Two years of training at brigade and divisional levels at Boulogne preparing for an invasion of England, coupled with the Emperor’s constant instructions to his subordinates, ensured that the officers of *La Grande Armée* were not only proficient in the coordination of large combat units and the fundamentals of combined arms, but that they had a shared tactical and operational doctrine. This shared doctrine and robust organization allowed Napoleon to conduct operations that may have been inspired by Bourcet and Guibert, but were on a scale that these two thinkers could never imagine. Guibert’s division was an organization designed for grand tactical movements on a single battlefield as part of a unitary army. Napoleon’s *corps d’armée*

was designed for operational maneuver during a campaign, over a wide area of operations, capable of independent actions within an overarching campaign plan as part of an overall *grande armée*.⁷⁴

Napoleon grasped the possibilities offered by the dispersion of Bourcet and Guibert, but went far beyond anything they had envisioned. Bourcet believed that organizational dispersion could give an army a frontage of twenty-five to thirty miles, and Guibert clearly saw his organizational dispersion as limited to a grand tactical scale. When *La Grande Armée* began its movement across the Rhine in September 1805, its front covered almost 140 miles extending from Strasbourg north to Mainz. The movements from Boulogne began in mid September with the crossing of the Rhine scheduled for 24-25 September. Seven corps d'armée, one cavalry corps and the Imperial Guard began a sweep from the frontiers of France and Hannover in a grand *manoeuvre sur les derrières* designed to isolate and trap the forces of Ferdinand and Mack before the Russians could join with them.⁷⁵

Napoleon's plan required detailed work and was designed, as Bourcet had stressed, with infinite flexibility, but in essence the plan was simple. While Murat's cavalry corps and Lannes' V Corps conducted a feint through the Black Forest, the rest of the army would move east from the Rhine and then wheel south to the Danube enveloping Mack's army if he were unwise enough to expose himself further west in response to the feint in the Black Forest. While Lannes and part of the cavalry conducted the feint and fixing action in the Black Forest, the rest of Murat's cavalry spread out in a wide arc screening the movements of the bulk of the French forces from the unsuspecting

Austrians who continued to move into the trap. On 2 September Mack's army moved into Bavaria and began to push on to Ulm just as Napoleon had hoped.⁷⁶

Unlike the Coalition armies, speed was not a problem in the *Grande Armée*. The average rate of march for the French corps was 30 kilometers a day. This rate of march was facilitated by the *corps d'armée*, each of which advanced upon a separate route so that no two formations would have to subsist in the same area in accordance with the French logistic doctrine of living off the land. Each route was carefully selected so that the neighboring corps could support one another, and the advance of each was screened by the corps' organic cavalry division. Speed and mobility were hallmarks of Napoleon's army just as Guibert had advocated, and the dispersion of the French corps seemed to threaten everywhere as Bourcet had suggested, but Bourcet and Guibert would not have recognized this campaign as having its seed in their theories. In fact they would have been stunned by the sheer magnitude of the undertaking and recoiled in horror at the enormous separation of the various units on the open plains. Napoleon had seen in their ideas possibilities for application at a completely new level than they had intended. This was especially true of Guibert who was concerned only with the conduct of battles, not campaigns. This was not an imitation of their ideas of dispersion, this was true innovation, if for no other reason than the magnitude.⁷⁷

Though both Bourcet and Guibert stressed assailing the enemy flank and rear, Napoleon's planned *manoeuvre sur les derrières* was unlike anything these two theorists had written. Guibert wrote of grand tactical flanking movements by a force that had effected its concentration prior to battle, essentially a division that moved to turn a flank

on the battlefield. While Bourcet wrote more of campaigns and implied that it would be possible to concentrate the dispersed forces once battle was joined, he still visualized the dispersed forces as a single unitary army covering a much smaller area. More importantly he thought that such dispersion in open country was far too risky. Napoleon's flanking actions were being conducted by large, semi-independent, mini-armies and covered an enormous area. Rather than trying to turn a tactical flank on the battlefield, he was gaining the operational flank and rear of a field army with highly mobile *corps d'armée* capable of concentrating once battle was joined by any one of them, and destroying an entire enemy army in a single operation.

Mack and Ferdinand were morally dislocated by the events taking place. Unable to comprehend Napoleon's true objective they did nothing and remained stationary at Ulm. The feint through the Black Forest region had the desired effect of pinning the Austrians frontally at Ulm. Unable to match the speed or decipher the true disposition of the French corps, Mack elected to stay put and seek safety in the strong position provided by the heights and river at Ulm. By 2 October, Napoleon began his wheel south to complete his *manoeuvre sur les derrières*, and the Austrian army at Ulm was doomed. Expecting the Austrians to make a head-long flight to the east and safety, Napoleon intended to "envelop him on all sides."⁷⁸

As the *Grande Armée* closed the trap around Ulm, Bernadotte's I Corps and Davout's III Corps, moved to the Isar river and Munich with a detachment of Bavarians to establish the strategic curtain blocking any aid by the Russians from getting to Mack. In the center of the French position, Marmont and Soult moved their II and IV Corps

south and then westward to further isolate the forces in Ulm and cut any escape route south to the Tyrol. The pivot of the wheel, formed by Murat's Cavalry Reserve Corps, most of Ney's VI Corps, Lannes' V Corps and the Imperial Guard, crossed over the Danube and began to relentlessly bear down on their victim. To complete the trap, Augereau was marching his VII Corps from the coast across the breadth of France to the Rhine to stop any westward move by the Austrians.⁷⁹

A crisis developed on the north bank of the Danube when General Dupont's division of Ney's VI Corps found himself facing 25,000 Austrians east of the Michelsberg Heights overlooking Ulm. Dupont had been left on the north bank of the river and was isolated from the rest of the Army now on the south bank. At this point Guibert's divisional system and two years of training in large unit maneuvers and doctrine paid off. Dupont engaged the Austrians, and through a series of counterattacks, based upon French strongpoint defense techniques and knowledge of combined arms operations, mauled his enemy severely before eventually withdrawing. His actions then, and during the following days in conjunction with Murat, prevented any further break-out from Napoleon's net.⁸⁰

Two detachments of Austrian troops managed to escape the trap, one to the east and one to the west. Archduke Ferdinand fled north with a detachment that was pursued and destroyed by Murat's cavalry although the Archduke escaped. By 15 October Ulm was completely surrounded, and on 20 October Mack surrendered. In just 26 days Napoleon's *manoeuvre sur les derrières* with *La Grande Armée* had caused an entire Austrian field army to cease to exist following nothing more than sporadic fighting by

only a small portion of his forces. The ideas of Bourcet and Guibert, finding fruition in the innovations of Napoleon in organization, training, doctrine, and campaigning had been validated.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

By all accounts it was a new style of warfare, and a true RMA that Napoleon introduced to Europe in 1805. A style of warfare that was marked by extreme mobility, new organizations, campaign plans, and speed. It was also a style which depended as much on the campaign, or operational level, as it did on the climatic battle which he sought. Rather than just moving an army to a chosen battlefield to attack an enemy, Napoleon was attacking his adversaries operationally as soon as he began a campaign. He blurred the distinction between campaigns and battle as he fused the two in his brand of warfare. Was he introducing something new, or merely implementing the ideas he inherited as he assumed power in France?

Chandler maintains that "with certain comparatively minor exceptions, Napoleon was not an innovator in his own right, but rather the developer and perfecter of ideas of others. . . . He added little to the art of war . . . except victory."⁸² Certainly Napoleon owed much to Bourcet and Guibert for his inspiration. Both advocated carefully calculated dispersion and mobility to force an opponent to disperse his force, and then rapid concentration to attack the chosen target before the enemy could reassemble his force. Yet both of these theorists were visualizing a unitary army under the direct command of one general. Guibert saw dispersion as a means to generate tactical flexibility on the battlefield through grand tactical movements, and neither visualized the enormity of the area of operations in which Napoleon's armies would operate.

Napoleon's concept of operations was on a scale larger than these two imagined, and would require new organizations and systems of command which these two never foresaw. It appears that Napoleon took what was useful from these thinkers and discarded the rest as he developed his own brand of warfare. Chandler admits that some of Guibert's ideas were "heretical" to Napoleon and that his contribution to Napoleon's philosophy of war was "somewhat indirect."⁸³

The organization Napoleon used to carry out his plan was the *corps d'armée*. This was much more than the divisions advocated by Guibert, or the separate columns of Bourcet. There are similarities between the divisions advocated by Guibert and Napoleon's corps as Chandler maintains, but there are substantial differences that make the *corps d'armée* unique. The *corps d'armée* was a combined arms organization, not a single arm unit with artillery support. Without cavalry performing its crucial screening role and providing shock power to the corps, it could not have operated as a semi-independent unit against much larger forces for very long. Guibert's division was a tactical, or grand tactical, invention. "He did not . . . understand the full implications of the divisional system in the strategic [or operational] as opposed to the tactical sense." In fact it may have been Guibert's insistence on using the term *tactique* to refer to the full range of military operations which blinded him to the possibilities at the campaign or operational level.⁸⁴

Napoleon's new system of command was built around his organization. It was a shared doctrine and a method of decentralized operations in which corps commanders were expected to exercise judgment and initiative within the larger framework of

Napoleon's campaign plan. While Napoleon often did not reveal his plan in detail to his subordinates, it is evident that they understood the general situation and what was expected of them.

It is without question that Napoleon was heavily influenced by the writings of Bourcet and Guibert. In fact it appears that the seed for his operational approach came from these two thinkers, but Napoleon did not imitate them. True imitation would have required him to adopt their theories in total, and to apply them on the level they intended. He drew from the theorists those ideas which were useful to him, melded these with his own thoughts, and discarded the rest. By doing so Napoleon introduced something new, which is the definition of innovation. The RMA in the early 1800's was not brought about by a commander who merely followed techniques and procedures developed by other theorists. The RMA of 1805-1807 was initiated by a leader who saw possibilities never imagined in the writings of others, and who developed the tools to make those possibilities a reality.

Endnotes

¹ David G. Chandler, *Dictionary of Napoleonic Wars* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), pp. 67, 188-189 (hereafter cited as Chandler, *Dictionary*); Robert M. Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 11-13; Basil Liddell-Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1933; reprint ed., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1980), pp. 51-100; Robert S. Quimby, *The Background of Napoleonic Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1979), pp. 106-108, 175-176.

² Epstein, p. 12.

³ Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 60.

⁴ David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 158 (hereafter cited as Chandler).

⁵ Epstein, p. 11; Hart, pp. 51-68; Quimby, pp. 175-176; Spenser Wilkinson *The Defence of Piedmont, 1742-1748* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), pp. 57-59.

⁶ Chandler, pp. 137-139; Hart, p. 68; Quimby, p. 176.

⁷ Epstein, p. 11.

⁸ Pierre-Joseph de Bourcet, *Principes de la guerre de montagnes* (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1877), pp. 61-62.

⁹ Bourcet, pp. 61-62, 67. "Cette méthode cachera à l'ennemi le véritable point qu'on aura déterminé pour son débouché dans le projet de campagne, et menacera les points de l'étendue sur laquelle on aura dessein d'opérer, puisque l'armée se trouverait à portée d'y marcher et d'y arriver presque en même temps."

¹⁰ Bourcet, pp. 63-72.

¹¹ Bourcet, pp. 61-72.

¹² Bourcet, pp. 65-66, 68.

¹³ Bourcet, p. 85. "Dans quelque objet qu'une guerre se déclare, il sera toujours nécessaire de former un plan de campagne."

¹⁴ Bourcet, pp. 85-87.

¹⁵ Bourcet, pp. 86-87.

¹⁶ Hart, p. 56.

¹⁷ Bourcet, pp. 88-89.

¹⁸ Quimby, p. 106.

¹⁹ Epstein, p. 13; Quimby, p. 106.

²⁰ Chandler, *Dictionary*, p. 189.

²¹ Jacques Antoine Hypolite, Comte de Guibert, *A General Essay on Tactics*, 2 vols., trans. an Officer (London: Admiralty, Whitehall, 1781), vol. II, p. 142.

²² Guibert, vol. II, pp. 1-10.

²³ Quimby, p. 156.

²⁴ Guibert, vol. II, p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 19-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34; Quimby, pp. 159-160.

³⁰ Guibert, vol. II, p. 148.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-179.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-63, 91-100, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-19, 21-23, 91-100.

³⁶ Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1862; reprint ed., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, n.d.; The West Point Military Library, eds. Thomas E. Griess and Jay Luvaas, n.p., n.d.), p. 123.

³⁷ Chandler, p. 144.

³⁸ Chandler, p. 134.

³⁹ Chandler, p. 145.

⁴⁰ Epstein, p. 17; Peter Paret, "Napoleon and the Revolution in War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 131.

⁴¹ Napoleon, I, *The Military Maxims of Napoleon*, trans. Lieutenant-General Sir George C. D'Aguilar (London: Freemantle & Co., 1831; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), V, p. 57 hereafter cited as *Maxims*).

⁴² Napoleon, I, *La Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris: Henri Plan and J. Dumaine, 1861), XII:10325 (hereafter cited as NC).

⁴³ Ibid., XVII:14307.

⁴⁴ Ibid., XIII:10810.

⁴⁵ Ibid., X:8075.

⁴⁶ Chandler, p. 145.

⁴⁷ *Maxims*, II, p. 55.

⁴⁸ Chandler, p. 145.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 146-154.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 146-154.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁵³ NC, XVIII:14707.

⁵⁴ Ibid., XI:9392.

⁵⁵ Epstein, p. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 185.

⁵⁷ Chandler, p. 163.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 163-164.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 170.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 170-175.

⁶² Albert Sidney Britt, *The Wars of Napoleon*, The west Point Military History Series, Thomas E. Griess, ed. (West Point: Department of History, USMA, Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1985), p.33; Chandler, pp. 185, 266; Epstein, p. 18; NC, VI:4626.

⁶³ NC, XIX:15310.

⁶⁴ Chandler, pp. 185, 266; Epstein, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Chandler, pp. 150-154, 185.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 160; Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1980), p. 129; Napoleon, I, *Unpublished Correspondence of Napoleon I*,

Preserved in the War Archives, trans. Louise Seymour Houghton, Ernest Picard and Louis Tueteu eds. (New York: Duffield & Company, 1913), vol. I, No. 182, 183, 184, 186, 187, 188, 190, (hereafter cited as *Unpublished Correspondence*).

⁶⁷ Chandler, pp. 134, 932; Epstein, pp. 7-8, 96, 174; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789-1961* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), pp. 53-55; NC, XIII:10558, XVIII:14707.

⁶⁸ Britt, pp. 33-34.

⁶⁹ Chandler, p. 178.

⁷⁰ Scott Bowden, *Napoleon and Austerlitz*, Armies of the Napoleonic Wars Research Series, vol. 1, "The Glory Years" of 1805-1807 (Chicago: The Emperor's Press, 1997), pp. 95-109, 121-130, 135; Epstein, pp. 21-23.

⁷¹ Bowden, pp. 95-109, 121-130, 135, 169-172; Epstein, pp. 21-23.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bowden, pp. 152-154, 172; Chandler, pp. 382-283; Epstein, pp. 21-24.

⁷⁴ Bowden, pp. 11-92; NC, XII:10329, XIII:10558, XVIII:14707; Epstein, pp. 23-26.

⁷⁵ Bourcet, pp. 61-62; Bowden, pp. 166-194; Chandler pp. 384-390; Epstein, pp. 23-26; Guibert, vol. II, pp. 61-63, 91-100, 145; *Unpublished Correspondence*, 174-176, 180-187.

⁷⁶ Chandler, pp. 384-392; NC, XI: 9720.

⁷⁷ Chandler, p. 386; Epstein, p. 25. While Chandler views Napoleon as an imitator of Bourcet, Epstein makes a strong case for Napoleon as an innovator rather than imitator based on the scope and size of this operation.

⁷⁸ Chandler, pp. 390-395; Epstein, p. 26; NC, XI: 9325.

⁷⁹ Chandler, pp. 392-397.

⁸⁰ Bowden, pp. 197-212, 215, 236-237, 240.

⁸¹ Bowden, pp. 239-241; Chandler, pp. 400-402; Epstein, p. 27; *Unpublished Correspondence*, 202.

⁸² Chandler, p. 136.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 142, 154-155, 179; Guibert, vol. I, p. 331.

⁸⁴ Chandler, p. 159; Quimby, pp. 162-163; R. R. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 107.

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